

November 5, 2009 - Defense Appropriator Comes Under Pressure to Nix Funding for Helicopter

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By Roxana Tiron

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Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.) on Wednesday said several administration officials and Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) have pressured him not to fund a new presidential helicopter.

Murtha, the senior defense appropriator in the House, told The Hill that he has been receiving “signals from Pelosi, National Security Adviser Jim Jones and Defense Secretary Robert Gates that President Barack Obama won’t sign the 2010 Pentagon appropriations bill if it contains money for the now-defunct VH-71 presidential helicopter.

The administration has also issued a veto threat over the funding. Obama has not personally threatened to veto the helicopter, but has made it clear he doesn’t want it.

Murtha suggested Congress could probably find the votes to

override a veto and noted that only 30 lawmakers voted against the House version of the bill, which included funding for the new helicopter.

But he said he would not let it come to that, and cast his decision to keep VH-71 funding out of the defense spending bill as protecting the president.

"We are not going to embarrass the president," Murtha said. "It is a very delicate situation when the president gets himself in a box ... He only got 30 votes against my bill."

CQ Today first reported Wednesday that defense appropriators are unlikely to fund the VH-71.

The Office of Management and Budget in July said it would advise the president to veto the bill over funding for the VH-71, built by Lockheed Martin and the Italian-British venture AgustaWestland. Gates last month wrote to Murtha saying he would recommend a veto to the president if the final 2010 defense appropriations bill included funding for the new helicopter.

Obama, during a summit in February, said that the VH-71 helicopter was an "example of the procurement process gone amok";

"The helicopter I have now seems perfectly adequate to me. Of course, I've never had a helicopter before — maybe I've been deprived and I didn't know it," the president joked at the time.

By mid-May the Pentagon had formally canceled the program.

The helicopter program has suffered from delays and ballooning costs; its price tag rose from an estimated \$6.5 billion to \$13 billion, in part because of growing technological requirements from the Marine One Squadron, which flies the presidential helicopters.

Murtha and several other lawmakers, including Rep. Maurice Hinchey (D-N.Y.), whose district houses the Lockheed plant, have argued that starting another new helicopter program would be even more expensive and take a longer time than continuing a scaled-down version of the VH-71. Lockheed Martin announced it would lay off 600 employees as a result of the cancellation of the helicopter program.

House defense appropriators have been looking for a way to tap into the \$3.2 billion already spent on the program. For 2010 they allocated \$485 million to make operational five VH-71 helicopters that have already been delivered. The Senate did not include any funds to continue the work on the VH-71, but included \$30 million for the development phase of a follow-on chopper.

The Obama administration has said that whatever the replacement for the decades-old Marine One helicopters will be, it would be cheaper and fly longer than the VH-71.

Murtha said on Wednesday that he was still looking for ways to save some of the VH-71 technologies, “but we are not there yet.”

“It’s a problem working it out with the White House,” he added.

Meanwhile, Murtha said that he hoped the conference report on the defense appropriations bill would get a vote by Thanksgiving but indicated that vote could easily slip into December. He said that the House and Senate committees have already informally negotiated the bill and would be ready to bring it up for a vote in a matter of seven days.